

ONE WAS DISLOYAL  
by  
Charles Mergendahl  
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HOUSE FOR THE BLIND**





Then he slipped. It was the first time in nine years, and it seemed ridiculous to him, as he felt his body falling off into darkness.

# One Was Disloyal

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copy one

By CHARLES MERGENDAHL

It was a baffling problem that confronted the blind professor . . . a problem that called for a rare blend of kindness and cunning.

**A**FTER the roll call, when the last student had answered "Here," and the last footstep had gone from the aisles, the old professor tapped his pencil against the desk. He waited, his gray head cocked like a listening dog, and he heard the familiar sounds of his early-morning classroom. First the scuffling feet, dying away until there were only voices, the fading voices and the quiet whisper of an unfinished sentence. And after that, a blind man's silence. The professor listened to the silence and stared into the blackness, into the haze before his eyes. Sometimes there was almost light, but never human figures or shapes with outlines. For there had been no outlines for almost ten years. He had been blind for nine years and seven months, and every thirtieth of every month he counted one more. On the coming thirtieth, it would be nine years and eight months, then nine years and nine months, and it would go on like that. It would always be like that. He stared into the blackness of his classroom, and he listened. He heard a foot move. He heard a bird outside the window. He waited.

It was almost two minutes before he heard the familiar footsteps. Sometimes it seemed like two minutes and sometimes like ten. But he always waited and he always heard them. First the slow creaking, the way he heard it now; then the foot being lifted, put down again; the walking, one foot before the other, slowly across the room to the door and through the door. And the final click as the door closed behind. And with the footsteps came the feeling that the entire class was watching. The entire class was holding its breath, knowing he heard the footsteps, knowing how it hurt him, and knowing that he could not identify the walker. The class had a way of knowing it was his first disloyal student in nine years and seven months of blindness. The very first, for he had a fine reputation

that way. No one ever cut his classes, knowing he was blind and it would not be fair. And his students had always felt a certain loyalty toward their blind professor. The students felt that loyalty, and the professor existed with that happy knowledge—that his students felt it. No one had ever walked out of his class, even though it would have been very easy. The professor might hear the footsteps, but he could never identify. And that was the problem—he could never identify.

And now he listened to disloyal footsteps. They moved toward the door and stopped. He felt a slight draft as the door opened, a sudden stuffiness as it closed. He heard the click and knew the disloyal student had gone, the way he had gone every morning now for over a week. He was the first one, and the professor felt a terror and a great hurt inside himself.

He waited a moment, hearing the students whisper among themselves, knowing they were angry with the first boy to take advantage of his teacher's blindness, knowing they wanted to shout his name into the darkness. For they knew the professor had heard him go, had always heard the going, from the first day, and would always hear it, all the days. And the professor waited until he felt the strange, uncomfortable silence that had started every class now for the past week, ever since the boy had begun his regular escapes.

Then he wet his lips and began, "Today we will investigate the effect of the Industrial Revolution —"

The professor lectured. And yet his mind refused to concentrate on the industrial revolution. He kept hearing the footsteps going out of the room, and each step was a thump in his mind, confusing the lecture, muddling his brain—the constant thump of imagined steps. He shook his graying head and prayed that

tomorrow the boy would stay. And he felt the new and blinding hurt. Someone had finally taken advantage of his blindness.

Once, only a few days before, a student had spoken to him about it. It was one of the brightest boys, and the professor knew him by voice.

"I feel I should tell you," the boy had said. "One of the students sneaks out every morning after you take attendance."

And the professor had said, "I know," and there was a new sadness in the words.

"You know?"

"Yes, I can hear him leave. I can recognize his footsteps. You recognize those things after a long blindness."

"Yes, but —" The boy had paused. Then he had said, "Do you know who it is?"

"I know his footsteps."

"But his name. Do you know his name?"

"I'm not interested in his name. I'm interested in his not leaving the class."

"But if I told you his name, you could speak to him, and then you'd feel better, and so would the rest of the class. None of us like it, but it hasn't seemed right to tell on him."

"Is it right now?"

"I think so. So do the rest of the class. They want me to tell you."

And the professor had smiled. He had said, "The boy's being unfair to me, so now you want to be unfair to him. And by being unfair to him, you are also making me unfair to you."

"You unfair?"

"Because I'd probably remember his name." And the professor had turned and groped for his briefcase. He had moved slowly out of the room.

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ILLUSTRATED BY ROBERT FAWCETT





A monument to understatement and moderation is The Bulletin's air-conditioned, soundproofed building in downtown Philadelphia.

quality of its Mummers' Parade; the Quaker-garbed statue of Billy Penn, and scrapple.

The things great and the things bad about The Bulletin are both products of The Chief, as his staff called him. His hand is still upon it, though now it is run by his two surviving sons, and though both are men of extraordinary ability in their own right. William L., Jr., former All-American tackle at Princeton and now vice-president and treasurer of the paper, still refers to his father, quite simply and reverentially, as The Chief. Robert, who has distinguished himself as president of the Associated Press, in addition to heading The Bulletin management and dictating its editorial policy, still sometimes lapses into the present tense in speaking of his father, dead thirteen years. Both served apprenticeships at the bottom, progressing through delivery, composing and newsroom; and Robert still bears marks of those days on two fingers mashed in a stereotyping machine while trying to set a new speed record in turning out a matrix. Both sons have adhered to the formula The Chief taught them.

It is no magic formula; the trick lay in recognizing it and applying it with painstaking care. Whatever The Bulletin does, in its columns or its business structure, it does with consistent thoroughness and minute attention to detail. This solid trait, composed too much of seeming trivia to lend itself readily to illustration, underlies every other factor in The Bulletin's success.

The Chief missed no bets, overlooked no angle. Recently, a new executive noted an odd item of \$300 in a bill for signs advertising The Bulletin. It was for "antiquing." Puzzled as to why brand-new signs should be antiqued, he pursued the mystery until finally, from an old-timer in the circulation department, he got the answer. "The Chief started that," the ancient explained. "The Chief said people in Philadelphia didn't like new things. He didn't want them to think The Bulletin was a new paper." The Bulletin pursues the same thought today. Most papers, when they modernize their make-up, proudly and loudly proclaim their progress. When The Bulletin, a couple of years ago, made thirty changes in its heads and other

matters of make-up, it did so at the rate of only one a day, so that the readers would not be disturbed by noticing that something new had been added.

It wasn't a new paper when McLean bought it in 1895 for \$73,000—largely borrowed—but it might just as well have been. Out of thirteen newspapers in the city then, with a combined circulation of more than 850,000, The Bulletin had less than 7000. The record McLean made still stands to the amazement of modern circulation experts. In one year he increased the sales fivefold, to above 33,000 daily. In five years he was crowding 130,000; and on the tenth anniversary of his ownership The Bulletin was at the top of the heap with 220,000—a more than thirty-fold increase. It has never been headed in Philadelphia since. Today, not quite fifty years after he bought it, only two of his original competitors remain, and they have changed hands and had injections of new money several times. Estimates of the current value of The Bulletin go to \$25,000,000—if the owners were crazy enough to sell. It is entirely a family-held concern.

McLean's background for newspaper ownership consisted of spectacular success as a youthful circulation hustler in Pittsburgh, and seventeen years as business and circulation manager of the old Philadelphia Press. Almost immediately after he bought the decrepit Bulletin, he plunged himself deeper in debt to increase its press capacity. Scoffed at, he replied, "The paper that gets to the newsstands and homes soonest with the latest news sells the most." To this end, he was a daring innovator in his mechanical and delivery departments, and made them the most modern in the country. This tradition of modernity in plant has persisted. The staid Bulletin is put together in streamlined, air-conditioned, soundproofed, scientifically lighted offices which resemble more a Hollywood version of a tycoon's suite than the traditional journalistic warrens.

Only in the news and editorial branches was he cautious; perhaps wisely, but perhaps because, not having had training in those departments, he did not



Circulation brains of The Bulletin still honor Founder McLean's early perception that Philadelphia is more a collection of villages than a city.



They give away no bicycles or percolators, but like homey promotions. Its Pigeon Man amuses kids, who tell parents, who buy The Bulletin.

know how to use the spices and condiments of journalism. He liked to pretend that he gave his editors a free hand, and told his sons, "If you always have to tell a managing editor what to do, you might as well be the managing editor yourself." The truth of the matter was that, though he did it by indirection, he laid down very narrow limits for his editors. When once a reporter wrote and the managing editor put on Page 1 an exposé of a gambling house running full tilt, The Chief came into the newsroom and, pointing to the story, quietly asked, "Do you think this is quite the sort of thing The Bulletin ought to do?" He said no more, but the executive caught the hint. There were no more exposés or crusades.

If the police raid a place, The Bulletin prints that fact. If another paper forces an investigation of graft or other skulduggery, The Bulletin gives its readers the bare facts of the progress of the investigation—and of its inevitable demise. It never stirs up trouble on its own. Cleverness and sophisticated writing are taboo in its news columns. Dwight Perrin, the present managing editor, is too wise to attempt to toss a monkey wrench into so successful a set of gears, but he has succeeded in getting a little flavor into the paper, partly by allowing a couple of his abler reporters to show flashes of top-notch newspaper style. Morley Cassidy, for instance, has been turning in one of the greatest jobs of war correspondence being done by any correspondent for a single newspaper.

"The newspaper is a visitor in the home," The Chief declared, "and so there should never be anything in it which conceivably could offend any member of the family." There never is in The Bulletin. When Winnie Winkle was about to have her twins a few years ago, the editors decided that the strips for the week prior to the accouchement were too realistic for Bulletin readers. Scores of other newspapers printed them without qualm or resultant complaints, but The Bulletin made the syndicate cartoonist draw for its readers another, more delicate set.

"If you use big headlines every day," The Chief taught, "you will have nothing in reserve to emphasize the big news when it

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAM FALK



## ONE WAS DISLOYAL

(Continued from Page 16)

But all that had been a week ago. And nothing had happened since—only the boy's going, every morning after the roll was called. And somehow it was a very important thing to the professor. He understood his own blindness, and he understood that the finest tribute ever paid him was the nine long years of perfect attendance—nine years in which no one had ever cheated. And the school had doubted it could happen.

"We're sorry," the trustees had said, "but you must understand—young boys are quick to take advantage. They'll recognize your—they'll understand that you won't know, and some of them will walk out after attendance."

"I don't believe so," the professor had said. "I don't believe they will."

"Of course, we could assign you a proctor. Someone to watch over the class and report on any cheating that might occur."

The professor had objected. It had been hard and it had taken many long hours to convince the trustees that he could handle the class by himself. But they had given in, finally, and after the first two or three years, they had even congratulated him on the way he had handled his pupils. "We don't understand how you do it," they had said. "Boys will be boys, you know."

And the professor had smiled and said, "But people are fair, you know. People have a group conscience, you know."

And now there was this. After nine years, there was this.

The professor was still talking. Something about the industrial revolution. He was sure that was the subject. At least it had started that way. It was what he had planned, but somehow he couldn't make sense out of the words. It was a meaningless lecture.

He stopped and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. He coughed and began over again, "The invention of the cotton gin in the year —" He stopped again. He couldn't remember the year that Eli Whitney had invented the cotton gin. A simple thing like that, a date he had quoted a thousand times, and he couldn't remember the year. He cocked his head. He heard a restless scuffling of feet. The class was becoming uneasy; they were embarrassed for him. He was losing his confidence, both in his class and in himself. And somewhere in his mind he heard the boy's retreating footsteps again, something of confusion, an imagined thing.

He coughed again, wiped his forehead again, tried to begin again. But there was nothing in his mind. No dates and no events. Only a dull thumping of footsteps, a very definite kind of step that he would recognize anywhere. He knew there was no one walking in the room. He knew the boy had already gone. Yet he could hear the steps all the same, thumping in his head, interrupting his thinking, making sweat stand out on his forehead, making his hand tremble as it groped for the handkerchief in his coat pocket. He tried to remember the date of the cotton gin. But there was nothing. Nothing. Only the imagined footsteps of a disloyal student, still thumping after the boy had gone.

"Excuse me," he said. "I think I shall — Excuse me." He moved from

the desk, groped his way toward the door, found the knob and went into the corridor. He stood at the rail by the stairway, trying to collect his thoughts.

Perhaps a glass of water, he thought. And he moved along the rail to the stairs.

He had been down those stairs a thousand times in the past nine years. He knew every warped board, every turn, every crack in the old staircase. He had never tripped and he would never fall. He knew the stairs too well for that, better than any of his students, better than any other professor in the school. For he knew the stairs by the way they felt, something more tangible and real than the quick sight of wood as a man hurried up to his classroom. Something personal from the sense of touch, each stair an individual personality in itself. No, he could never fall, and in the past it had amused him that people had worried.

He put one foot straight before the other, came to the first turn, took two short steps across the platform and started down again. Here was the step with the long crack, here the one with the loose board. Next would be the slippery one. Oil had done that—made it slippery, and the oil had soaked in. The janitor said he would plane the step down to roughen it, but the professor had said he would never slip.

"No, Jerry," he had said, "no, I'll never slip. Never."

And the janitor had scratched his bald head and laughed in his cracking voice.

"I guess you know them stairs better than anyone, professor. I guess you do."

"Yes, I do, Jerry, and you don't have to fix the oily stair. Not for me, anyway."

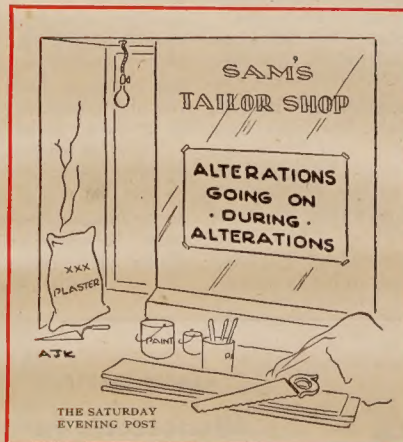
And Jerry had laughed, and he had laughed with him, confident in his blindness.

But that had been two weeks ago, a mere two weeks, and he remembered it now as he leaned his weight forward and

put out his foot to step on the slippery board. It was one step away, then four more to the next landing. There was a turn at the landing, so that someone coming up the stairs could not see another person going down. It was all in his mind as his foot moved toward the slippery stair. Then suddenly, below the platform, coming slowly up the stairs, he heard the creak of footsteps, the same disloyal footsteps.

The professor leaned against the rail. His hand closed hard over the wooden railing. He shook his head and touched his forehead with his hand. Then he listened again, but the footsteps would not go away. They were coming closer, coming slowly up the stairs to the platform below him. And as they moved nearer, he was sure they were not in his mind. They were real this time, and they were the same old footsteps, the ones he had heard each morning for the past week, the steps he heard in his mind and the steps he heard in reality.

He wet his lips. He moved his foot to go down to the oily step, changed his mind again and stood uncertain on the step above. He tried to think of something clear. He was going down after a glass of water on the next floor. The next step was the oily one. Those two things were clear. He had been lecturing on the industrial revolution. That was clear. There were footsteps. And that was clearer than anything else. They were coming up the stairs, creaking on each step, slowly and carefully, as though the person were trying to come softly.



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The professor leaned against the rail and waited. The footsteps were rounding the turn. They were moving faster, becoming louder. Then they were on the platform only four steps below him. They were crossing the platform. And suddenly they stopped. There was nothing. The professor waited. But still there was nothing. He wondered if the footsteps were real or perhaps another part of his mind, the same imagined steps he had heard while trying to lecture. He listened, but there was nothing. He strained his eyes and saw only a blur. He moved his foot again, undecided, then pulled it back again. He waited. And he stood that way, waiting and listening, conscious of the passing of time, sure there was someone on the platform watching him, sure it was the disloyal boy trying to hide, not daring to pass him; as sure as he could be sure of anything in the darkness. And yet he was not quite sure. His mind had played tricks all that morning.

He wet his lips again. He bit hard on his lower lip. He opened his mouth and tried to speak, knowing it was ridiculous if there was no one on the landing, knowing inside himself that it was important for him to overcome the tricks of his mind. He had to stop thinking about the boy who left his classroom or he had to make him stop leaving in the mornings to come—somehow, before it was too late; somehow, before he lost his personal confidence, all the confidence of his class. Everything.

But there was nothing to be heard.

He moved his lips. "Is someone there?" And he wondered at his own voice in the silence.

He heard the creaking of boards, groaning by themselves, the way they do on an old stairway.

"I was coming down," he went on. "The next step is rather slippery. I don't want to fall on you. I don't want to —"

And still there was nothing. He tried to get a hold on himself, to make himself

believe there was no one on the platform. Yet, inside, he felt there was, and it was the only way of knowing. The feeling. His mind raced and he wondered what the boy was thinking, if the boy was really there. He wondered what the boy thought, what he felt. He was afraid, probably. He was probably very much afraid.

"I'm always terrified to make this step," the professor said. But he was not terrified, and he was not quite clear in himself as to why he had lied. "It's silly, isn't it? After all, I've been going down these same stairs for nine years now. But somehow I always feel I shall fall on this particular step." He paused and rubbed his hand along the rail. "I wonder if you'd mind standing in front of me, in case I should fall. I wonder if you'd mind." And he listened again, and he heard a slight creak. It might have been the boards moving by themselves. Or it might have been a person on the platform. It might have been.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you." And suddenly he knew why he had unconsciously lied about being afraid. He knew, and it almost amused him.

He hesitated. He put out his foot, aware that he was acting like a fool, that his whole being was going to pieces over an imagined thing, aware that he could never conduct his class again until it was clear in his mind, until he was sure of the boy and sure of himself. And his foot touched the oily stair. He felt it under his shoe. He felt it when it touched, and he felt it as he shifted his weight onto that foot. He let go of the railing and brought his full weight onto the one foot. And he stood that way on the oily board, his mind whirling crazily as he balanced on his one foot.

Then he slipped. It was the first time in nine years, and it seemed ridiculous to him, more ridiculous than frightening as he felt his body falling off into darkness. It was a ridiculous thing, and he smiled as he fell into the darkness.

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HAROLD STASSEN'S VERSION OF

### Minnesota's Favorite Dish



down many a wild duck in the lake and marsh regions of Minnesota.

Many varieties of duck are bagged in the state. All are rich and full-flavored, and all are cooked about the same way, though the roasting time is varied to suit the prospective feaster—some like it rare, others prefer it so tender the flesh falls from the bones. Here is the method:

#### Roast Wild Duck

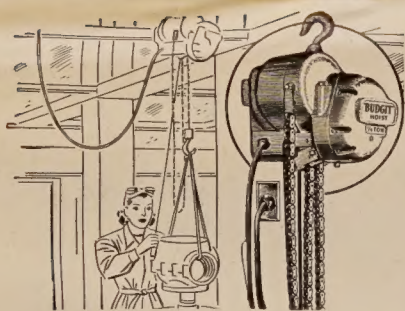
Pluck feathers from duck, pour melted paraffin on it, let cool, then break paraffin away, thus removing the down. Clean duck thoroughly. Many ducks are too small to make stuffing worth while, but an onion or stalk of celery placed in the cavity will enhance the flavor. If stuffing is used, stuff lightly, so as not to burst the skin. Place duck on trivet in roasting pan and cover with thin slices of salt pork or bacon, or brush with melted fat. Roast in moderate oven, 325 degrees: for rare duck, 10 to 12 minutes per pound; well done, 15 to 20 minutes per pound. When half done, season with salt and pepper. Baste frequently with fat in pan. To make gravy, thicken drippings in pan with flour, and add water as necessary. Serve with steamed wild rice.

—MARTHA ELLYN SLAYBACK.

NOW that Comdr. Harold Stassen, former governor of Minnesota, is back in this country, he'll no doubt be dining on roast wild duck with wild rice as soon as the season permits. Even in the Pacific, where he recently served as flag officer to Admiral Halsey, Stassen ate wild duck from his native state—the canned variety, sent him for Christmas by friends. He wrote his wife that the gift brought back nostalgic memories of hunting seasons and duck dinners.

During his preliminary training at Great Lakes Naval Training Station, an instructor who had carefully shown him how to hold and aim a rifle was astonished when he stepped to the shooting position and fired ten straight bull's-eyes. What the instructor didn't know was that Stassen, during his college days, had captained a rifle team which had won national honors. His marksmanship has also brought





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There were arms on his shoulders. Someone was holding him up, steadying him on the platform. Someone was guiding him to the next step, helping him to find it, so he could continue down to the next floor. He felt the sweat on his forehead, damp and hot, and he felt his hands trembling on the rail.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you very much."

But there was no answer. Only silence again. Yet the hands had been real, and he could be sure of that. Someone had caught him, a person who did not want to be recognized. And that was a fact, not something in his mind.

He moved on down the stairway to the fountain on the next floor, and he drank for a long time, feeling the cold water go down inside his body, cooling him inside, but not taking the sweat from his brow or the shaking from his hands. Then, when he felt more at ease again, he climbed the stairs, slowly and surely, avoiding the oily stair, the stair with the loose board, the stair with the long crack, all the remembered stairs. He went into the classroom and closed the door softly behind him.

The next morning began like all the others before it. There were the same voices, fading away to the same last whisper as the professor tapped the desk with his pencil; the same scuffling of feet, fading away to a last scrape, and then the low, hushed breathing of the students and the single bird outside the window.

The professor called the roll, mechanically as always, and he heard the answering voices, dull and always the same:

"Albright?"

"Here."

"Antwerp?"

"Here."

"Atkinson?"

"Here."

"Baker?"

"Present."

He stopped. He smiled a little to himself. Baker always said "Present" instead of "Here." It was something distinctive, a way of knowing one boy's personality above all others. It was a refreshing thing on a dull morning. He finished the roll, and in his mind he knew that it was not a dull morning really. It was the most important morning in a long time—in nine dark years. He closed the roll book, a book he had never seen, but had memorized instead. It had always amused him that he bothered to open it at all. In the mornings of the past he had smiled about it, but he did not smile this morning. His lips were pressed tight together, and there was a slight tremble in his hands as he cleared his throat and tapped twice on the desk with his pencil.

"This morning—" he said. He stopped and began again. "This morning, before we begin, I would like to express my sincerest thanks to an unknown student who was considerate and thoughtful enough to guide me down the stairs yesterday morning when I left the classroom for a drink of water. Since classes were being held throughout the building at that time, the thoughtful student realized I would be quite alone on the stairs, whereas before and after class there are always a number of other students going from one floor to the next, who are there to assist me should I need them. Consequently, he was by my side all during the time I was out of the classroom, and when I slipped for the first time in nine years, he caught me before I could fall and injure myself."

He stopped talking and listened to the silence in the room. He thought it odd how you could hear a silence when you had become accustomed to using your ears. People said you could hear a pin drop, but it wasn't the pin you heard; it was the silence.

He cleared his throat again, and he stared unseeing over the classroom. "I do not know," he went on, "the name of that student." He has preferred to remain anonymous, due to a most admirable sense of modesty—the modesty that accompanies all truly admirable actions. And I am all the more grateful to him because of that anonymity." He paused, then went on again, "However, I have already spoken to the janitor about one cracked board, one loose board and one slippery board. They will be repaired immediately. So, in the future, it will not be necessary for that unknown student to waste valuable time during class simply to watch over an old professor who requires a morning drink of water when the stairs are vacant. I assure him that the next time I leave the classroom alone, I shall be quite safe on the newly repaired stairs, although I consider it my great good fortune that he was with me yesterday when I tumbled. And I do want to thank him—from the very depths of my gratitude."

He stopped and he waited. He heard a few whispered words, a slight rustling among the seats. He heard a few students cough, and he found himself counting off the seconds, waiting for familiar footsteps. Once he heard a board creak and groan back into place, and he held his breath, felt the dampness begin once more on his forehead. But there were no actual footsteps. One minute passed, and then two minutes, and still there was nothing. And after three long minutes, he let his breath out slowly in a long sigh. For he knew inside himself that no one would leave the class that morning, nor any other morning in the days to come.

He smiled and spoke without first clearing his throat. And he felt young again and content again. It had been a week since he had been able to speak so easily. "I forgot to tell you yesterday. Somehow it had slipped my mind. The cotton gin was invented by Eli Whitney in the year 1793." He went on, and it was one of the finest lectures he had ever given.

And after class that day, as he moved easily down the stairs and into the hallway, he remembered the three imperfect stairs. And he remembered how he had told his class that the janitor was going to fix them.

He smiled, and he turned and went into the janitor's room.

He stood for a moment in the doorway, and he heard the janitor's voice, high and rasping, "And how are you today, professor?"

"Oh, I'm fine, Jerry. I've never been better. Not for over a week now."

"And is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, Jerry. I wondered if—well, you remember those boards you were going to fix in the stairs—the ones I told you didn't bother me at all?"

"I remember."

"I wondered if you'd fix them."

The janitor's voice came near in the dark, "Did you slip, professor? I'm sorry if you slipped."

"No, I'd like you to fix them for the sake of my —" He paused, embarrassed. "My students."

"Your students?"

"A student. A particular student. I promised him you'd fix it."

"I thought it was you," the janitor said. "I thought you had slipped."

"Me?" And the professor laughed softly, feeling it come out in the good way that all laughter should come. "Me?" he said. "I never slip. I never have and I never will. Not accidentally, you see. Perhaps once in a long while, but never by accident." And he was still laughing as he turned and walked slowly down the hallway. There was an almost arrogant confidence in the way his shoes tapped regularly on the wooden floor.



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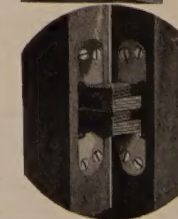
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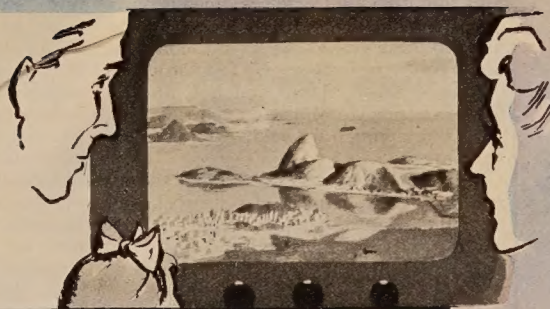


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